

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

“Privileged to prophesy? Think again!”

Thomas F. Heck

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) Sept. 27, 2015

Reflecting on Numbers 11:25-29, James 5:1-6, and Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

The latter part of today’s gospel belongs to a group of Jesus’ so-called “hard sayings,” which lash out especially at those who harm others. It’s not about “victimless crimes” like failing to fast or to ritually wash. No—it’s about behavior that hurts others! That leaves a scar!

Woe to anyone who harms a little one, Jesus says, whether a child or any innocent person. We can fill in the blanks of this warning with *today’s* victims of abuse, seduction, trafficking and exploitation. Seldom do we see such fierceness in Jesus as in his words to those whose sins do lasting harm to the most vulnerable of people.

With due respect to the gravity of these gospel passages, I would like to reflect more today on the theme introduced in the first reading and echoed in the gospel, about just who gets to prophesy or speak for the Spirit.

There’s more to the Numbers story and the other readings than just a dove out of its cage—a bird behaving badly—an impulsive and unruly Spirit! These stories remind us that, just when we think we understand God’s

will, something totally unexpected occurs and we have to start over again.

Predictability can be comforting. We need our routines! But it can also be another name for control. We do not like surprises if they interrupt our routines or *challenge our certainties*.

The story of Eldad and Medad, who missed an important meeting with Moses and his other 70 prophets, reminds us all in the Judeo-Christian tradition that the *Spirit* works where she will, not just in the tent, but also elsewhere—in the camp, for instance. Clearly some of the official prophets around Moses were not happy with this incursion on *their privileged status*. Think RCWP and our community’s years-long challenge to the status quo regarding women’s ordination. It *feels* to us like we are doing prophetic work, right? Hold that thought...

In today’s gospel, continuing the theme of prophecy, Jesus gets right to the point with his apostles, who don’t want outsiders grabbing the powerful role that belongs to them. We can just imagine their grousing back then: “Lord, tell those outliers *not* to work miracles in your name!” Today they

might be saying “Lord, tell those women not to preside at Eucharistic liturgies . . . They aren’t *like* us.”

But Jesus chides them for their smallness and reminds them that the Spirit is always bigger than the *in* group or *its* plans. God freely pours out grace, and sometimes even power, on anyone who will use it for good. There are no insiders and outsiders for God, who is free to work through anyone, and (surprisingly) often does.

This lesson should remind us in the Beatitudes community, in all humility, not to overreach in assuming that we have the Spirit’s unqualified blessing for what we are doing and whom we are challenging.

We are indeed outliers with respect to recent Church tradition and discipline. But we must be mindful that there *are* and probably will always be *other* voices, *other* prophets, *other* outliers—even in relation to us, in whom the Spirit is at work.

Criticizing the institutional church/ or temple/ or mosque – you name it – by providing a dissenting example is a passionate calling, a heady thing to

do—a rush in its way. But *our* game might not be the *end* game, when all’s said and done. We may never know! Who really can claim to know the mind of God? The intent of the Spirit?

The call to prophecy is not necessarily a call to inerrancy. Even prophets sometimes get it wrong. Jonah predicted doom for Nineveh and it never happened.

This is why *we need to stay humble*, and never assume that we have the whole truth - or a monopoly on the Spirit’s agenda. One of the central prayers in our liturgy, variously called the Our Father or the Jesus Prayer, includes the phrase “*thy* will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Discerning that will and not presuming inerrancy when we think we’ve “got it” is an enormous challenge for us—and a sincere and recurring call to humility.

It is also a reminder that what we *do* for others—how we *treat* them (as James has been teaching us all along) — is as important as what we *say*, *or preach*, *or profess*, *or prophesy!*

Amen!